

Rémy Zaugg: Context Exhibition

Roman Kurzmeyer, 2022

In his painting, Rémy Zaugg examined questions of perception and was particularly concerned with the perceptibility of art and its dependence on the presentational form.¹ This was a key subject for his generation of artists after the curated, temporary exhibition had become more important than art criticism as a format for communicating contemporary art.² However, Zaugg not only devoted himself to visual perception in his painting practice, he also worked and published on matters of aesthetics throughout his life. In 1982, he was invited to *documenta 7* by Rudi Fuchs, and Heiny Widmer, then curator of the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau, prepared the exhibition *Le Singe Peintre* together with Zaugg. This title alludes to a popular topic of 18th century French painting, “the ape as a painter”. In this way, artists such as Jean-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), to whom Zaugg referred, opposed the academic training in painting of their era, which focused on copying and the technical ability to imitate (“mimesis”). In the catalogue, Zaugg explains his artistic position in relation to US Minimal Art, which was in the process of establishing itself internationally at that time. In contrast to Donald Judd, who was concerned with the “visibility of things”³, Zaugg was interested in the “concept of perception”. According to Zaugg, this concept is “connected to that of perceptibility and thus to the perceiving subject, who must, so to speak, create the work in face of the work, and who must be a poet, therefore, in the sense that poetry is a process of making.”⁴ The prerequisite to the work’s visibility is that it is a three-dimensional object, i.e. the physical presence is absolutely central, “which is not the case with a picture of the customary thickness hanging on a wall”.⁵ Zaugg, an artist primarily associated with painting at the time, published his encounter with object artist Judd under the title *The Cunning of Innocence, Perceiving a Sculpture* in 1982.⁶

Balthasar Burkhard (1944–2010), a Bernese photographer and artist of almost the same age as Zaugg, took photographs of the Rodin sculpture in the courtyard of the Kunstmuseum Basel for this book, circling the work as he did so. The six *Burghers of Calais*, conceived by Rodin as a dynamic ensemble in this work designed as a monument, are juxtaposed with six cubes by Judd from the Kunstmuseum’s collection, which Zaugg discusses in the book. In 1982,

- 1 This text is a revised and substantially extended version of the chapter devoted to Rémy Zaugg in: Roman Kurzmeyer, *Zeit des Zeigens. Harald Szeemann, Ausstellungsmacher*, Zurich/Berlin/Boston 2019, pp. 121–137.
- 2 Cf. Evelyn Beer (ed.), *L’Exposition imaginaire. The art of exhibiting in the eighties*, s’Gravenhage 1989, includes the english translation (by Josine Fonderie, pp. 362–385) of a shortened version of Rémy Zaugg’s contribution to the exhib. cat. *Balthasar Burkhard*, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, 1983. Particularly relevant for the academic debate was an anthology by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (eds.), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London/New York, 1996.
- 3 Richard Shiff wrote of Judd in his essay “There Is No Meaning” in 2019: “His works became beautiful as their default position, when they succeeded in avoiding the distraction of connotative meaning; they were specific with respect to sensation, non-specific with respect to culture”, in: Richard Shiff, *Sensuous Thoughts: Essays on the Work of Donald Judd*, Berlin, 2020, p. 14.
- 4 Heiny Widmer and Rémy Zaugg, “Zaugg, Widmer und ‘le singe peintre’”, in: *Rémy Zaugg. Le singe peintre*, exhib. cat. Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau, 1982, p. 28. Also in: Rémy Zaugg, *Über Malerei und Bilder. 1980–2005*, GS 5, ed. by Eva Schmidt, Cologne, 2016, p. 89.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 29 resp. p. 86.
- 6 Rémy Zaugg, *Die List der Unschuld. Das Wahrnehmen einer Skulptur*, Eindhoven, 1982. Also: id., *Die List der Unschuld. Das Wahrnehmen einer Skulptur. 1973–1980*, GS 4, ed. by Eva Schmidt, Cologne, 2016.

Zaugg had also worked with the Bernese architects Atelier 5 on the extension for the Kunstmuseum Bern, and from this he developed the book *Für das Kunstwerk, Kunstmuseum Bern* (For the Work of Art, Museum of Fine Art Bern) in 1983.⁷ Burkhard was also involved in this project as a photographer. Burkhard's circle of friends in Bern at that time included not only the architects of Atelier 5 and many other artists but also the exhibition organiser Harald Szeemann (1933–2005), who had already commissioned Burkhard to document exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Bern during the 1960s. The photographs of Szeemann's legendary exhibition *When attitudes become form* (1969) were decisive for the impact this exhibition has successfully unfolded to this day. When Balthasar Burkhard was invited by Jean-Christophe Ammann (1939–2015) to show a solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1983, Zaugg wrote two texts for the catalogue.⁸ Burkhard and Ammann also knew each other from Bern, where Ammann worked as Szeemann's assistant at the Kunsthalle. In 1970, when Ammann had become director of the Museum of Art Lucerne, Burkhard was involved in the exhibition *Visualised Thought Processes* with photo canvases he had created together with Markus Raetz. In 1983, on the occasion of Burkhard's exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel, Zaugg was not content with the role of catalogue author; he even quasi appropriated his artist friend's exhibition project.⁹ He conceived a publication in which he, as an artist, explained in detail what constituted an art exhibition and, on the basis of the works on display – which, as an exhibition, thematise the human body –, he discusses his own process of perceiving these photographs. The exhibition, developed together with Zaugg, marked the beginning of Burkhard's impact as an artist; henceforth, he displayed his photographs in meticulous stagings, in heavy steel frames and behind glass. Zaugg's interest in the interplay of work, presentational form and perception also continued in the following years and had an impact on his own practice and his understanding of the artist's task.

In 1985, Szeemann curated the exhibition *Spuren, Skulpturen und Monumente ihrer präzisen Reise* (Traces, Sculptures and Monuments of their Precise Journey) at the Kunsthhaus, Zurich. Szeemann was reacting to the dominance of painting in exhibitions at the time with this and other exhibitions of sculpture in Vienna (1986), Düsseldorf (1986), Berlin (1988) and Hamburg (1989). In Zurich, he wanted to show sculptures “that thematise stillness, that rest in themselves and are easily overlooked”.¹⁰ The show included works by Louise Bourgeois, Constantin Brâncuși, James Lee Byars, Tony Cragg, Joel Fisher, Alberto Giacometti, Wolfgang Laib, Marisa Merz, Royden Rabinowitch, Medardo Rosso, Ulrich Rückriem, Michael Rutkowski, Richard Tuttle, Cy Twombly, Thomas Virnich and Franz West. Szeemann spoke of the exhibition as a “poem in space”¹¹ and described it in the gallery text as a “symposium of stillness”: “Art's claim to strength appears here in the guise of fragility, ‘powerful as the echo’, expressing doubts in the monu-

7 Rémy Zaugg, *Für das Kunstwerk. Kunstmuseum Bern/Atelier 5*, Zurich, 1983. Rémy Zaugg's own contribution to the book also in: id., *Der Ort des Werkes. 1982–1993*, GS 6, ed. by Eva Schmidt, Cologne, 2016, pp. 27–88.

8 Rémy Zaugg, *Ausstellung: Balthasar Burkhard*, exhib. cat. Kunsthalle Basel, 1983. The first text “Einleitende Darlegung” with a new title “Ausstellung” also in: Zaugg GS 6 (see note 7), pp. 7–25. English translation of the text see note 2. The second text “Die Ausstellung” with a new title “Die photographischen Bilder von Balthasar Burkhard” also in: Zaugg GS 5 (see note 4), pp. 109–155.

9 Cf. Thomas Seelig, “Ausstellung. Balthasar Burkhard”, in: *Balthasar Burkhard*, exhib. cat. Museum Folkwang, Essen, Fotomuseum Winterthur/Fotostiftung Schweiz, Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Göttingen, 2017, pp. 166–169.

10 Harald Szeemann, *Spuren, Skulpturen und Monumente ihrer präzisen Reise*, exhib. cat. Kunsthhaus Zürich, Zurich, 1985, p. 8.

11 Harald Szeemann, quoted from: *Jahresbericht der Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft*, 1985, p. 22.

mental.”¹² The works could be experienced within an exhibition architecture that Szeemann had designed and employed in the same building in 1983 for *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk: Europäische Utopien seit 1800* (Towards the Gesamtkunstwerk: European Utopias since 1800). He oriented himself on the floor plan of the basilica and so referenced a sacred space. The staging of the sculptures in the space, on the other hand, followed the structure of a classical landscape painting. In 1986, the art magazine *Parkett* published a review of this exhibition by Rémy Zaugg, which appeared in the form of an interview with art critic Siegmur Gassert (1942–2009).¹³ Zaugg criticised the visitor guidance system resulting from Szeemann’s staging of the works because it did not do justice to the contemporary understanding of art and fell behind the current state of development in art presentation. The exhibition suggested that “the creator of this landscape image wanted to lead the viewer from the urban, the general, the profane, the everyday via the mediocre and the middle-class to the special and the exclusive, to the worldly superior at the end of the avenue: in other words, to the precise vanishing point of contact with the divine beyond.”¹⁴ Zaugg and Gassert also address the second spatial situation deliberately evoked by Szeemann, a cathedral with atrium, nave, high altar and side chapels, in the aforementioned *Parkett* article. Here, Zaugg mentions the apses in particular, which, due to their triangular ground plan, he believed would force a distanced, purely optical relationship between the viewer and the work of art. He assesses the exhibition as restorative. “To base an exhibition on a defunct view of the world can, of course, merely demonstrate the past even if present-day works have to meet this need. That is the well-known trick of restorative argumentation and is a reactionary rhetoric.”¹⁵ Although the selection of artists seemed convincing to him because the poetic, the sublime and the endangered had challenged art during the 20th century, he maintained that Szeemann showed works favouring the sentimental form of presentation because they themselves corresponded to the common, kitschy, exaggerated form of poetry and tenderness. Zaugg concludes his reading of this exhibition with a plea for awareness in the approach to history – in the exhibition sector as well – so that in a time of disorientation, the future and the past would remain unmistakably separate.

This critique of the Zurich exhibition met the successful, but in the 1980s also very controversial exhibition maker on a level playing field. Zaugg did not problematise the fact that Szeemann’s exhibition was a staging, as would have been expected of an artist at that time: He merely questioned the form of this staging. This point of view was related to his own interest in the medium of the exhibition. At the same time as the exhibition makers, new forms of work were emerging with Conceptual Art in the late 1960s, such as installation art, as well as a critical questioning of authorship by the authors themselves. The exhibition organiser, as Christiane Rekade explains, “took the place of the artist as the one who assembled and presented the artworks under his name according to his own criteria”.¹⁶ Charismatic personalities such as Rudi Fuchs, Pontus Hulten, Germano Celant, Jan Hoet, Kasper König or, in Switzerland, Jean-Christophe Ammann, Urs Raussmüller, Johannes Gachnang and Harald

12 *Spuren, Skulpturen und Monumente ihrer präzisen Reise. November 29, 1985 – February 16, 1986*, exhibit. handout, Kunsthaus Zürich.

13 Siegmur Gassert and Rémy Zaugg, “Reisen zurück und nach vorn”/“Journeys Backwards and Forwards”, in: *PARKETT*, No. 8, April 1986, pp. 122–129/130–135 (engl. transl. by Peter Pasquill). Also in: Rémy Zaugg, *Ausstellen 1984–2004*, GS 7, ed. by Eva Schmidt, Cologne, 2016, pp. 39–55.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 131 resp. p. 48.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 133 resp. p. 48.

16 Christiane Rekade, *vermitteln/vernetzen – präsentieren/produzieren. Die Rolle der Kuratorin und des Kurators im zeitgenössischen Ausstellungswesen*, master’s thesis (typoscript), Philosophische Fakultät III der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2001, p. 83.

Szeemann shaped the way that contemporary art would appear in museums in Europe in the late 20th century. Female curators in important positions or with major public impact were found mainly in the US context at that time – I am thinking here of Lucy Lippard in particular, but also of Marcia Tucker or Alanna Heiss. In this historical context, a time of showing, the young artist Zaugg began to examine the question of how and where art should be perceived. In 1987 he published the programmatic text *Das Kunstmuseum, das ich mir erträume/oder/ Der Ort des Werkes und des Menschen (The Art Museum of My Dreams or A Place for the Work and the Human Being)*.¹⁷ In 1991 he began to work as an exhibition maker himself, albeit without understanding himself as a curator. In the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris he organised a retrospective exhibition of Alberto Giacometti's work. In the same year, he published *Gespräche mit Ammann (Conversations with Ammann)*, who had given Zaugg a solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel in 1988, he confronted his own works with works from the collection at the Kunstmuseum Lucerne, and also gave a lecture in Saint-Étienne, France, on the tense relationship between temporary and permanent museum exhibitions.

Rémy Zaugg wanted to transform the art museum from an institution that collects and archives into a “place of the work and the human being”. The work of art should no longer be communicated as historical testimony, but as an “autonomous work” that – regardless of when it was created – exerts an effect “today, on the people of today and exclusively on the people of today”.¹⁸ In such a place, the work is “not out of use, it expresses itself. And in expressing itself, it is useful to man”.¹⁹ Zaugg and Szeemann agreed on this point. Their view of the task of the exhibition organiser could not have been more different, however. Szeemann advocated a consciously subjective selection, presentation and interpretation of art by the exhibition organiser and was therefore an exhibition author. Zaugg, on the other hand, who set up exhibitions as an artist, insisted that the exhibition organiser remain invisible as an intermediary. Work and subject should be able to meet without mediation, through the “act of exhibiting”. The only form of interpretation that Zaugg allowed was one that is not “manipulative”.²⁰ He wanted to make the curator's authorship unrecognisable. The criticism of the exhibition *Spuren, Skulpturen, Monumente ihrer präzisen Reise (Traces, Sculptures, Monuments of their Precise Journey)*, therefore, referred to the visitor guidance system as defined by the exhibition organiser and not to the selection of artists or the theme of the exhibition. In 1991, in the catalogue of his Alberto Giacometti retrospective, Zaugg not only explained his exhibition principles, but also made it unmistakably clear that the exhibition organiser needed to take a back seat behind the work: “The art of exhibiting the autonomous work and the autonomous subject is only an art, therefore, when it knows how to make itself disappear.”²¹

Exhibitions of Rémy Zaugg's paintings were installations choreographed by the artist himself – this was the point of contact with Szeemann. But while the latter combined works and understood the exhibition as a unity, Zaugg's focus was on a situational analysis of the perception of the works within the architectural environment of a presentation. Zaugg was not an exhibition maker.

17 Rémy Zaugg, *Das Kunstmuseum, das ich mir erträume oder Der Ort des Werkes und des Menschen*, Cologne, 1987. Also in: Zaugg GS 6 (see note 7), pp. 127–185. English translation by Elizabeth Carey-Libbrecht: Rémy Zaugg, *The Art Museum of My Dreams or A Place for the Work and the Human Being*, Berlin, 2013.

18 Rémy Zaugg, “Die unumgängliche Propädeutik” (1987), in: *Rémy Zaugg. Vom Bild zur Welt*, ed. by Eva Schmidt, Cologne, 1993, p. 99. Also in: Zaugg GS 7 (see note 13), p. 81.

19 Ibid., p. 100 resp. Zaugg GS 7, p. 82.

20 Rémy Zaugg, “Concevoir et réaliser une exposition, c'est devoir s'effacer” in: exhib. cat. Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris 1991, p. 73. Also in: Zaugg GS 7 (see note 13), p. 100.

21 Ibid.

As an artist, he was interested in matters of perception, which he investigated by means of painting and installation. In 1988, the writer and publicist Felix Philipp Ingold summed up the artist's objectives as follows: "The creator of art [...] does not create art as a work, or the work as art; instead, he creates the conditions in which perception may be practised as an art, he gives the viewer – who participates in art to such a degree that he produces it, as a moving fact of perception – opportunity to see and feel what he himself has become through the evolution of the initiated work, and so the artist shows him the 'why and the how' of what he is today."²² In Zaugg's view, a suitable exhibition venue and appropriately designed spaces were prerequisites for promoting "perception as art". This is one of the reasons why, as an artist, he became deeply involved with questions of architecture in the early 1980s and entered into a close and friendly relationship with the architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron. As mentioned, Zaugg's criticism of Szeemann related less to the latter's selection of artists and more to what he saw as the outmoded staging of the works as a landscape painting in a sacred space, as evoked by the exhibition architecture. Pathos and poetry often came into contact in Szeemann's exhibitions. This was also the case with *Traces, Sculptures, Monuments of their Precise Journey*, something that communicated itself immediately. Not only did Szeemann adopt the exhibition architecture of *Towards the Gesamtkunstwerk* and, as Zaugg noted, follow a sacred typology within it; he also exaggerated the works by exhibiting the fragile objects without pedestals and with as little protection as possible and by skilfully handling the emptiness – the space not used for the exhibition – in a scenographic fashion. In his Giacometti exhibition, Zaugg would also activate the empty space, but for different reasons to be found in Giacometti's works themselves: Zaugg made the miniatures the centre of his engagement with the artist and exhibited the sculptures, which were only a few centimetres in size, in monumental white walled booths.

The white wall, which became a topic for international audiences with Gustav Klimt's appearance at the Venice Biennale in 1910, along with the white exhibition space, was in harmony with the architectural and pictorial development of modernism until the 1960s.²³ The "White Cube" was directed against "static museum practice", especially in the permanent art historical collections, and helped to establish a genre-specific concept of art that emphasised pictorial autonomy. In post-war art, artists sought to leave behind the white exhibition space and test new exhibition formats. Initially, Rémy Zaugg's position on this issue was ambiguous. In the case of the extension of the Kunstmuseum Bern by Atelier 5 in 1982, he argued in favour of painting the walls a light grey colour; moreover, the paintings from the collection were to be exhibited unframed in order to focus full attention on the work itself.²⁴ A little later, Zaugg also returned to the white exhibition wall that had become the standard for modern art presentation in his projects. In 1991, he linked it to the idea of the autonomous work of art and the attendant function of architecture: "While the white colour of the wall allows it to appear in its original untouched state, it also helps the blurredness, the semi-darkness or the indeterminacy of a place to disappear, making the architecture present down to its very last corner: the white uncovers and exposes the architectural location, which relates the perceiver and the work to each other."²⁵ Unlike

22 Felix Philipp Ingold, "Zaugg lesen. Notizen und Exzerpte", in: *Rémy Zaugg. Für ein Bild*, exhib. cat. Kunsthalle Basel, Berlin, 1988, p. 59.

23 Walter Grasskamp, "Die weiße Ausstellungswand. Zur Vorgeschichte des 'White Cube'", in: Wolfgang Ullrich and Juliane Vogel (eds.), *Weiß*, Frankfurt a. M. 2003, pp. 29–63.

24 Zaugg 1983 (see note 7), esp. pp. 214–222 resp. Zaugg GS 6 (see note 2), pp. 78–85.

25 Zaugg 1991 (1993) (see note 20), p. 72 resp. Zaugg GS 7 (see note 13), p. 94.

critics of the “White Cube”, Zaugg was convinced that the autonomous work of art required specific conditions for its perception. What interested him, Zaugg wrote in 1983 in the catalogue of Balthasar Burkhard’s exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel, was “the presentation realised by an artist showing his own works within the framework of an institution called upon to organise art exhibitions”.²⁶ The artist Zaugg understood exhibiting as an activity to make works of art optimally accessible to visual and physical perception.

In later years, he wished to revise this position. While the artwork itself – in its presence as an artefact of material culture – had been at the centre of his thinking for many years, he now realised in discussions with his architect friends that it might be worthwhile to extend the art space into public space, and thus to continue the “search for the human being” in urban space.²⁷ Work on architecture suitable for the perception of art and his preoccupation with the medium of the exhibition were carried by the conviction that above all, works of art were among the means “with and in which man may reveal himself, take shape, perhaps appear”.²⁸ In 1993, art historian Jean-Christophe Royoux asked Zaugg: “Do you consider the exhibitions you realise to be works of art?” and received the answer: “Personally, I make no distinction between a project that aims to exhibit an artist’s work and the activity consisting in producing an image. I don’t establish any kind of hierarchy between these two fields. Cézanne and Giacometti behaved like romantics. They experienced their own difficulty in grasping reality as a failure, something dramatic. I see it, on the other hand, more as something that gives pleasure; grasping reality is a task with no end. This may explain the growing importance of the exhibition’s particular mode of expression and the fact that the autonomous image has receded into the background for me. Likewise, I find architecture of little interest; I am excited by the relationships between the buildings, by the urban planning, to which I think the exhibition is equivalent. After questioning the masterpiece that led to an accumulation of objects in the studio, I have planned exhibitions of these objects, and the exhibitions led in turn to a new learning experience, the experience of the city.”²⁹

The renewal of art through Conceptual Art in the 1960s not only led to a novel concept of what has since been called art; it also had an impact on the concept of the exhibition and the presentational forms that subsequent generations of artists and curators developed, as well as the possible tasks of an artist in society. Today, the exhibition is only one of various spaces in which artists can operate. The concept of art, as Christiane Rekade wrote in 2001, looking back on the 1990s, “has expanded in the direction of art communication”.³⁰ Museums are now also staffed by curators whose work is oriented towards discursive programme formats, involving the public, whereby exhibitions are of secondary importance but artists play an increasingly important role.

Initial release in: *Rémy Zaugg. Der besondere Ort/The Particular Place*, hg. von/ed. by Eva Schmidt, Köln 2022, S. 42–47.

26 Zaugg 1983 (see note 8), p. 14 resp. Zaugg GS 6 (see note 2), p. 10.

27 Zaugg 1983 (see note 7), p. 14.

28 Ibid.

29 Jean-Christophe Royoux and Rémy Zaugg, “Die Wirklichkeit zu erfassen ist eine Aufgabe, die kein Ende kennt”, in: *Rémy Zaugg. Vom Bild zur Welt*, ed. by Eva Schmidt, Cologne, 1993, p. 338. Also in: Zaugg GS 7 (see note 13), p. 125.

30 Rekade 2001 (see note 16), p. 84.